

The Reality of Carnal Christians

Is there such a thing as a carnal Christian, a believer who persists in disobedience to God? Some say no. While conceding that Christians can and do sin, they deny that true believers will persist in sin until the end of their physical lives. They believe that God's work of salvation in a person guarantees perseverance in good works and obedience. Those who believe in the reality of carnal Christians are accused of promoting license toward sin (though their accusers usually agree that they do not purposely promote sin). The word "carnal" (*sarkikos*, belonging to the realm of sinful flesh) is used here to denote persistent sinful behavior. What then does the Bible say about carnality and Christians?

A simple reading of the Scriptures demonstrates that Christians can struggle persistently with sin.

- Rom 7:7-8:17 – The apostle Paul describes his own experience of struggling with his sinful flesh and concludes that victory comes from the Holy Spirit's control.
- The Corinthians – This whole church is living in sin (pride, divisiveness, sexual immorality, lawsuits, etc.) though they are surely saved (1 Cor. 1:2-9; 4:15; 6:11). Four years after Paul visited them, he writes to confront and correct their on-going sins.
- The Galatians – This church is turning away from the true gospel of grace to a false gospel of legalism. Though saved (1:1, 3, 6), they are in danger of experiencing God's curse (1:8-9) and losing the benefits of grace (5:4).
- 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 - Some in the church were disorderly, lazy, and in need of admonishment.
- 1 John 1:8 and 10 Christians who deny the reality of sin in themselves walk in darkness, make God a liar, and thus deny the need to practice confession.

In short, the fact that the Bible has exhortations against sin, warnings of consequences for sin, instructions for church discipline, and admonitions for confession and restoration is meaningless if persistent sin is not a possibility and a reality for Christians.

Only one example of a believer persisting in sin until the end of life proves the reality of saved people who live carnally. Nevertheless, here are some of the many examples.

- Saul – Though anointed by God and though he prophesied (1 Sam. 10:1-13, 24) and exiled mediums and spiritists from Israel (1 Sam. 28:3), Saul died in sin (1 Chron. 10:13-14). So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. ¹⁴ He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse).
- The kings of Israel and Judah – Some like Asa (2 Chron. 14-16), Jehu (2 Kings 9-10), Joash (2 Kings 12:2; 2 Chron. 24), Amaziah (2 Kings 14:1-20; Chron. 25), and Uzziah (2 Chron. 26) were commended for aspects of their faith and obedience, yet died in disobedience.
- Solomon – This king of Israel and author of Scripture defected from God and worshipped idols in his old age. The Bible record does not indicate he repented before he died (1 Kings 11).
- Ezekiel 18:24 – A righteous man who sins seriously will die physically because of his sin.
- Ananias and Sapphira – These members of the early church died because they lied (Acts 5:1-10).
- The Corinthian believers at the Lord's Supper – Because they took the Lord's Supper in an unworthy way, some died (1 Cor. 11:30; "sleep" is a euphemism for physical death).

These biblical examples may remind us of present-day situations we observe among Christians.

The Scriptures recognize the reality of sin in believers, but do not excuse it. Sinning believers are held accountable for their behavior.

- Divine discipline – God chastens those He loves who need correction (Heb. 12:5-11).
- Church discipline – Churches are instructed to discipline and restore sinning believers (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6-15).
- Temporal discipline – Sinning and selfish believers can lose blessings and fullness of life (Ps. 32:3-5; 51:1-12; Matt. 16:24-26).

- Lost rewards – Sinning believers can lose rewards in this life and at the Judgment Seat of Christ at the end of life (Matt. 6:1; 1 Cor. 3:13-15; 13:3; James 2:12-13; 2 John 8).
- Loss of usefulness – Christians who do not progress in sanctification should not be teachers (Heb. 5:11-13) and can be useless in God’s service (John 15:1-6; 2 Tim. 20-21).
- Loss of fellowship – Believers who live in sin walk in darkness and forfeit fellowship with God and with other believers (1 John 1:3-7).
- Physical death – Christians can commit sin that persists unto death (1 Cor. 5:4-5; James 5:19-20; 1 John 5:16).

These consequences, the process of discipline and restoration, are meaningless if those sinning are unbelievers. We see no exhortations to get these sinners saved.

Conclusion

A single example of a believer who dies in a sinful condition proves the reality of carnal Christians. Yet the Bible has many examples along with teaching about how God exhorts, warns, and disciplines those who persist in sin. To deny the reality of carnal Christians ignores overwhelming biblical evidence in favor of a false theological construct that teaches salvation is obtained and proved by submission to God’s will and that faith is a gift from God that cannot finally fail.

This view cannot offer full assurance of salvation because it depends on one’s performance until the last day of life, and no one can predict the future. Neither does it specify how long a person can sin without being called carnal. We wonder how such teachers deal with the reality of sin in their own lives and how they can finally judge another’s salvation. Only God can Judge. The Bible, our observations of Christians, and self-examination show the continuing reality of the Christian’s struggle with sin. We have the comfort of God’s abundant grace in Romans 5:20 for good reason: “...But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.” No amount of sin can exhaust the amazing grace of God.

Grace Can be Abused by Believers

The Pauline epistles have numerous warnings about believers that produce less than the “fruit of the Spirit” in their lives. In 1 Cor 5:1-2 there is an

embarrassing immorality going on; the believer is involved in an incestuous act with the “wife of his father.” If this sort of immorality were proof that a person was not a believer, would you not conclude that this person is not saved? Paul doesn’t say that in verse five. He does suggest that if he does not repent, they may have to treat him as an unbeliever and exclude him from the Lord’s Table. But in 2 Corinthians we see that he repented and was restored to fellowship.

In 1 Corinthians 11:29 there was disorder at the sacred moment of the Lord’s table. Paul doesn’t say they are unsaved, but warns that they will be chastened. In Galatians 5:4 believers are caught in legalism, also in Colossians 2:20-21. Second Thessalonians shows believers in laziness, but Paul doesn’t say they are unsaved. It is not inevitable that believers will be obedient. A believer can and does sometimes get into some form of carnality or what many call “back-sliding”! Lordship advocates say that this failure is clear evidence that the person was not saved in the first place.

The Prodigal Son

In Luke 15:11-32 we have the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger of two sons asks his father for his portion and leaves to a far off land and squanders it in “riotous living.” A famine falls upon the land, and the son is reduced to competing with swine for stubble in the fields. Recognizing his failure, he returns to his father’s home to ask forgiveness and to become a servant. The father welcomes him back, brings out a fine robe for him to wear, puts a ring on his finger, and slaughters a fat calf for a party.

Some teach that the son is a new believer being welcomed into the family. The lordship advocates say that he was only among the “elect,” and his return home is fulfillment of his election. But what is he called all through the passage? A son! He refers to his father as “father.” The prodigal son is unquestionably a believer that has departed from the plan of God for his life and comes back. He never lost his title of “son.” He never lost his salvation. He remained secure in his father’s love in spite of his disobedience. His father never stopped loving him and showed that love at his return home.

Every one of us has presumed upon grace. Often we take liberties and exceed the bounds of propriety. As a believer, we have all acted

inappropriately, consciously or unconsciously, and in so doing, abused the grace of God.

Other Acts of Failure in the Scriptures

In Hebrews 10:29 we see punishment brought upon a believer for his rebellion against God.

Heb 10:29 Of how much sorer punishment, suppose you, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?

The writer uses *koinos* which is translated here as “unholy” but might be better translated as “common or ordinary,” which is what the word means. In other words, by his actions, this person has treated the saving work of Christ with contempt, treated it as if it were “common and ordinary”.

The word translated here as “despite” is the Greek word *enubrizo*, which means to insult. He has insulted the Spirit of Grace by his actions, and punishment is to befall him. But notice the phrase “...the blood of the covenant, **wherewith he was sanctified...**” Only believers are sanctified in the blood! This is clearly a believer! But lordship advocates say a believer can’t do these things!

Heb 12:15 Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; 16 Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

You can’t “fail of the grace of God” unless you are saved and have the grace of God in your life to begin with. This is a warning to Jewish believers to beware of failure in their spiritual walk with Christ by returning to the Law, not loss of their salvation.

2 Peter 2:1 But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily (secretly) shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

Are we looking at believers or unbelievers here? What about the phrase "... denying the Lord that **bought** them...?" These false teachers and false prophets were saved. They were bought from the slave market of sin. Lordship advocates would claim they could not be saved for their false teachings and practices. But clearly the scriptures say otherwise. "Swift destruction" is the loss of their spiritual walk and the resulting chastisement probably including being taken out of this life under the penalty of sin leading to death.

Some people believe that if they get saved everything in their life will work out. That isn't true. If you get saved your eternity is settled, but your life still has to be lived. Fortunately, God has left grace provisions for us to use to live that life the way we are called to live it. And it is the grace from God to accomplish that which can be abused, fallen from, walked away from, strayed from, etc. Christ is Lord whether acknowledged so or not.

The moment you trusted Christ you did not comprehend all of God's Word, much less comprehend all that you were given as a believer. That requires time and teaching. The moment I trusted Christ all I knew is that I didn't want to go to hell!

The Mechanics of the Spiritual Life

Whose slave are you?

God's willing servant or a slave to your sin nature?

Inside the Will of God

Discipleship/Experiential Sanctification

- Faith in God's Promises
- In fellowship w/God
- Yielding your will to God's will
- Walking / Abiding
- Filling of the Holy Spirit
- Guided, Enabled by Spirit
- Christ formed in you
- Eternal Life functioning
- Fruit of the Spirit
- Love thy neighbor...
- God Glorifying
- Growing Spiritually (maturity)
- Producing fruit
- Delivered thru trials
- Reaping what was sown

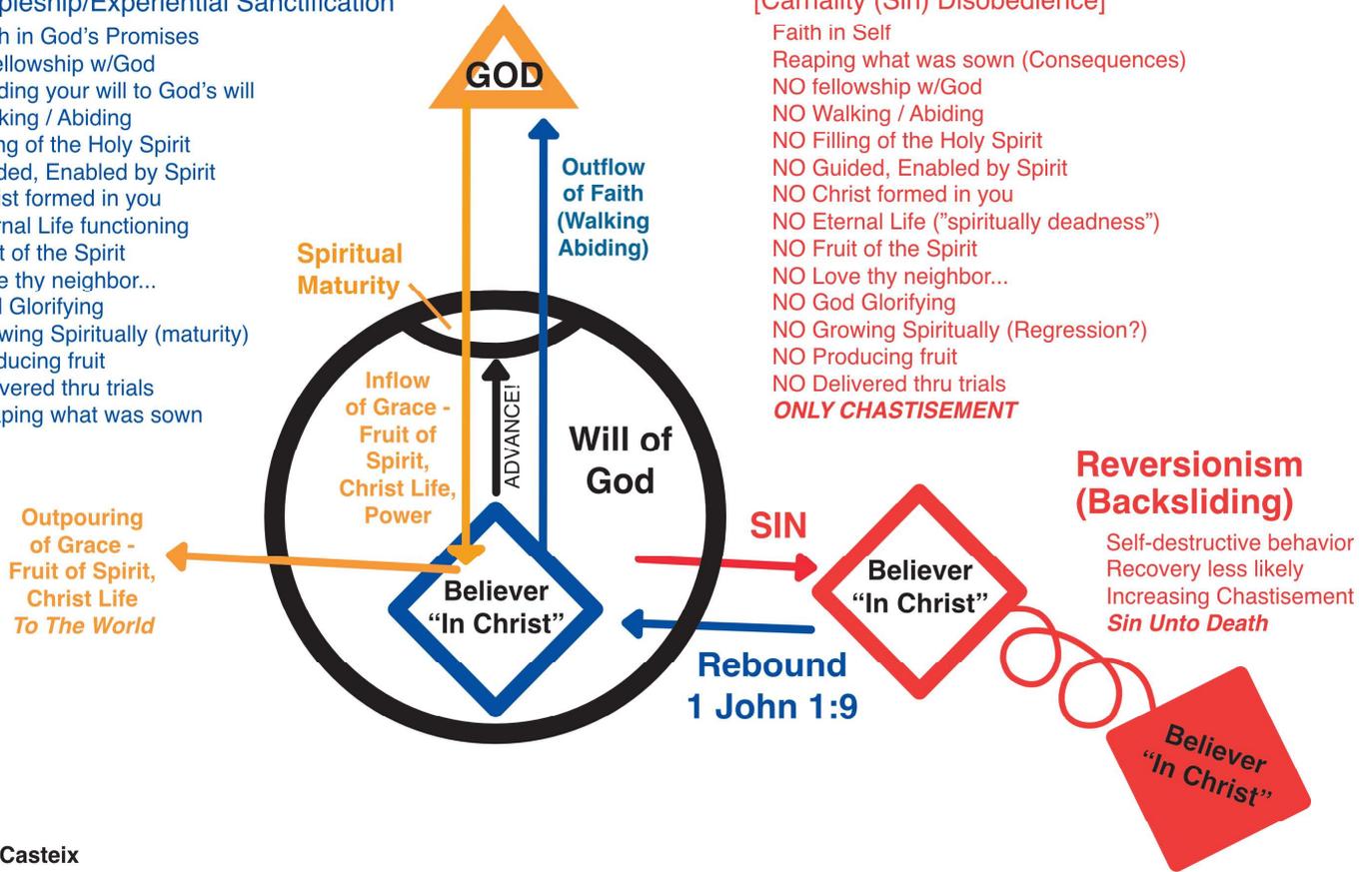
Outside the Will of God

[Carnality (Sin) Disobedience]

- Faith in Self
- Reaping what was sown (Consequences)
- NO fellowship w/God
- NO Walking / Abiding
- NO Filling of the Holy Spirit
- NO Guided, Enabled by Spirit
- NO Christ formed in you
- NO Eternal Life ("spiritually deadness")
- NO Fruit of the Spirit
- NO Love thy neighbor...
- NO God Glorifying
- NO Growing Spiritually (Regression?)
- NO Producing fruit
- NO Delivered thru trials
- ONLY CHASTISEMENT**

Reversionism (Backsliding)

- Self-destructive behavior
- Recovery less likely
- Increasing Chastisement
- Sin Unto Death**



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The Book of Life

A passage often used as proof text for losing your salvation is Revelation 20:12. Once again—Context!

Rev 20:12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

The charge is you must be found in the Book of Life to be saved and you must not have your name blotted out of the Book of Life. That much is true. The problem is that Revelation 20:12 is talking about the “Last Judgment” sometimes called the “Great White Throne Judgment.” This is the last judgment in human history and occurs at the end of the Millennium after the Gog revolution and before the destruction of the old heavens and earth and the creation of the new.

The only people present for judgment there will be the lost, thus this judgment is often called the “Judgment of the Wicked Dead”. Their names will not be found written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, and thus will be judged on the basis of their works (Book of Works), which will, of course, be found grossly insufficient when compared to the standard, the perfect righteousness of Christ. Sin is NOT an issue at any judgment after the Cross because sin was judged at the Cross. Those at the Last Judgment are people who have rejected the free grace of salvation and have thus, in effect, chosen to be judged by their works. Everyone at this judgment will be cast into the Lake of Fire.

Conquering

Rev 3:5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

This is from one of the seven letters to the churches—this one is Sardis. While this church, as a whole, was dead or dying, Christ recognized a godly remnant in the Sardis church. He promised that true believers will be dressed in white, symbolic of the righteousness of God, that their names will remain in the Book of Life, and that He will acknowledge them as His own before His Father and His angels.

The statement that their names will not be erased from the Book of Life presents a problem to some. But a person who is truly born again remains regenerate, as John said elsewhere (John 5:24; 6:35–37, 39; 10:28–29). While this passage may imply that a name could be erased from the book of life, **actually it only gives a positive affirmation that their names will not be erased.**

The question of who is saved is determined not in heaven but in life on earth. What is revealed here is the *confirmation* of one's destiny by means of God's written records.

Straying

Can a believer “stray” from his faith or relationship with God and lose his salvation? He can stray but that does not affect his salvation. It will affect his spiritual life: it would be non-existent, and he would forfeit any rewards in heaven.

Isa 53:5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. **All we like sheep have gone astray**; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the **Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

We have all strayed (carnality) and some never recover as we discussed elsewhere in this study. So, if to stray means to lose your salvation, then we are all in trouble.

Fallen from Grace

Galatians 5:4 is often used to argue that a believer can lose his salvation. Yet once again we have a context issue. Paul is seeking to dissuade the Galatian believers from trusting the OT Law as a means of experiential sanctification.

Gal 5:4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

Look at the context. Paul is dealing with an issue in the Galatian churches that resulted from “Judaizers” coming along behind him and claiming something like this, “True, you are saved by grace but unless you also keep the Law, especially get circumcised, then you aren’t really living the (spiritual) life demanded of a believer.” This is pure legalism and kinda looks like a first century version of Lordship Salvation.

The Galatians 5:4 passage has nothing to do with salvation. Paul is saying turning to the Law and accepting circumcision as a meritorious work to find judicial righteousness has further dire implications, which the Galatians were called on to consider. Anyone seeking justification **by Law** has **been alienated** (*katērgēthēte*) **from Christ**, that is, such a person would no longer be living in a sphere where Christ was operative. The Greek word means separated or loosed from something, or to render something ineffective, inoperative, or powerless. Their spiritual lives would be “ineffective, inoperative, and powerless” if they attempted to live it through Law keeping. The spiritual life during the Church Age is a supernatural life lived by faith and NOT by human efforts.

In other words, they would have zero for a spiritual life, because they would be attempting to live out their spiritual lives on the basis of human efforts and not on the basis of faith as it is called to be lived (Gal 5:16).

Gal 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Gal 5:5 For through the Spirit, **by faith**, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus **neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith** working through love.

Only life in the Spirit under the grace of God can produce the righteous spiritual life that God desires. If you believe you need to be circumcised and live a life of human works under the Law, you will have “fallen from grace”—that grace being the grace provisions of a spiritual life lived by faith.

The spirit of legalism goes beyond adherence to OT Law. For example, if we worship to impress others, we do not impress God. If we have daily devotionals only to satisfy a schedule, we do not satisfy God. If we trust in our sacrificial service to earn favor from God, then we ignore God’s sacrificial gift to us. Only life in the Spirit under the grace of God can produce a righteous spiritual life that God desires. That is the grace that we are in danger of falling from.